

Task Force on the Economic Future of Western Maryland

September 23, 2020;

1 PM

Meeting Minutes

Task Force Members in Attendance:

Senator George Edwards, *Co-Chair*

Delegate Jason Buckel, *Co-Chair*

Jody Sprinkle, *TEDCO*

Shelley McIntire, *Hagerstown City Council Member, MML*

Al Delia, *Vice President for Economic and Regional Engagement, Frostburg State University*

Jake Shade, *Allegany County Commissioner and TCCWM Board Member*

Stu Czapski, *Executive Director, Allegany County Chamber of Commerce*

Nicole Christian, *President and CEO, Garrett County Chamber of Commerce*

Paul Frey, *President and CEO, Washington County Chamber of Commerce*

Andrew Sargent, *Sr. Business Development Representative, Western MD, Maryland Department of Commerce*

Task Force Staff in Attendance:

Michael Siers, *Economist, Maryland Department of Commerce*

I. Call to Order/Welcome and introductions

a. Remarks by the Co-Chairs

Senator Edwards and Delegate Buckel welcomed members of the task force as well as members of the public.

II. Review of the purpose for the task force

a. Review statute and expectations

The co-chairs discussed the current state of the region. Senator Edwards noted that the region is hurting, and that the goal of the task force is to gather a number of stakeholders together to focus in on meaningful ways to improve the region. Delegate Buckel noted that all of the counties are unique, though they have many common characteristics, such as the importance of natural resources to the region. In addition to supporting the use of natural resources, the aim of this body is to develop a wish list of recommendations that both recognize the unique strengths of each county as well as work well as a coherent regional strategy.

The co-chairs noted that one hope for recommendations will be developing new industries in the region, such as cybersecurity and other industries specifically highlighted in the statute. Senator Edwards noted the strengths of Western Maryland's education system and noted the need for infrastructure

improvements to roads, water, and sewer, among others, as means to attract new businesses to the region. The co-chairs mentioned a desire to hear from site selectors as part of the task force's meetings.

b. Discuss Open Meetings Act

The co-chairs reviewed the Open Meetings Act with the members, including the fact that all meetings will be open to the public and that meeting minutes will be made public for each meeting.

III. Timeline for the task force

Senator Edwards noted that the original timeline for a final report is January 1, 2021. While this is still a goal, COVID-19 has made the situation more complicated. As such, it may be the case that a set of draft ideas is prepared by the end of the calendar year with a final report on those ideas prepared in the spring. The goal is to be able to use recommendations from this task force in the next legislative session, so too much of an extension could impact that goal.

IV. Preliminary data on current economic conditions in Western Maryland

a. Overview of current data and findings

Michael Siers, staff for the task force, presented on Western Maryland's current economic conditions and implications of this data for the development of recommendations. The presentation touched on a number of topics, including:

- Trends in population over the prior decade;
- Broad strategies to help minimize population loss;
- Economic data, including changes in employment, the number of businesses, how employment varies by county, wage levels, and the region's recent response to COVID-19;
- An analysis of the region's industries with a competitive advantage, and how competitive the region is for industries mentioned in the statute establishing the task force;
- How the rise of remote work may impact population trends in Western Maryland; and
- Key questions to consider as the task force develops recommendations.

b. Discussion of research, potential extensions of the research, and implications of the findings

Members indicated they would like to focus on many different strategies to develop the region's economy. Members wondered if the Maryland Department of Commerce could play a role in encouraging more businesses to locate in Western Maryland. Emphasizing the region's great education and need for new infrastructure were noted.

V. Discussion of initial recommendations

One of the major concerns raised was regarding the availability of broadband in the area. Businesses are less likely to locate without access to high-speed internet. Additionally, while members, especially in Garrett County, have seen an increase in people permanently residing in what had been their vacation homes, this trend requires high-speed internet in order to continue.

VI. Proposed Workplan

a. Plan for future meetings

Members discussed that the next meeting should either be in early or late October. No date was settled on during the meeting. The co-chairs expressed hope that a future meeting could be held in person.

b. Potential research topics

Members emphasized that future meetings could focus on many of the industries already listed in each county's economic development plans. When examining these industries, hearing from site selectors would be preferable, as would a more detailed focus on the needs of those industries (e.g., infrastructure, workforce, supply chains, access to customers). One member suggested identifying successful case studies from areas similar to the region as a way to help develop recommendations.

VII. Closing Remarks/Adjournment